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The Church and National Development: towards a Philosophy of Collaboration

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Abstract

In many parts of Nigeria, many Christian Dioceses are celebrating their centenary- hundred years of evangelization within the particular area. As this has been the tag of several diocesan celebrations in the past five years, it has become relevant to examine the contribution of the Church to Nigeria's national development. The present study, using Catholic Church as a point of reference examines the contribution of the Catholic Church in the area of social justice, humanitarian services, education, morality, economic development and peace and her role as a prophet and the conscience of the nation. The result of this study will hopefully unveil the enormous contribution of the Catholic Church to national development. The paper

further observes the need of the Church to constantly renew herself and her objectives as an institution. It recommends the inevitable need for the government to fully support the Church for an enhanced and sustainable national development.

Keywords: Church, National, Development, Philosophy, Collaboration.

Introduction

The primary goal of the Church, right from the time of its inception, has been the propagation of the gospel. She has also been concerned with the wellbeing of her members. However her concerns in recent times have gone beyond the narrow confines of the wellbeing of her members to embrace the larger society (Onwuliri, 2008). To meet up with her concern for the larger society, she has created agencies and arms involved in various aspects of development needs spanning various sectors, such as education, health, housing, care for the poor, conscience formation, as well as other social and political needs. In contemporary society, especially Nigeria, where there are perceived ambiguities and perception of competition between the state and the church in meeting development needs, creating an atmosphere of competition rather than coexistence, a clear illustration of this with the attitude of the state to Church-built schools taken over by the state in the early 1970's (Onwuliri, 2008). With this in perspective, it has become imperative to once again examine the role of the Church to national development.

The church

The Church has had a dynamic image. In Latin, the early Fathers of the Church referred to it as the *Ecclesia*- 'the called out ones'. From this perspective it is understood why the Church is spoken of as 'the elect', 'the saints' and why Jesus asked Peter to 'build my Church' (Mt 16:18). In the wake of Greek neo-Platonism, the Church was seen as 'the school of truth and the fellowship of adepts' (Kung, 1981). To Roman Stoicism, the Church is principally seen as 'a well ordered community governed by laws'. In the early Church, they were referred to as 'the people of God' or 'the Church of God'. St Paul speaks of the Church as "the fullness of Christ and of fellowship" (Ephesians 3:19). He also speaks of the Church as "a mystery and sacrament of salvation" (Eph 3:4). The Second Vatican Council speaks of the Church variously, as 'the people of God' (Gaudium et Spes, 1965), "Bearer of the message of salvation" (Gaudium et Spes, 1965), "Mystical Body of Christ" (Indulgentiarum Doctrina, 1967). The Church is also

understood as the whole body of Christian believers or any division of this body in professing the same creed and acknowledging the same ecclesiastical authority (Njoku, 2008). For the purpose of this study, the Church whose contribution to national development is evaluated is the Catholic Church.

Understanding the concept development

There are various aspects to what constitutes development, however common to all these is a positive change in human wellbeing (Onwuliri, 2008). It is understood as a long-term improvement in the standard of living, as felt and judged to be by most of the people in the country (Levi and Havinden 1982). In the past, discussions and commentaries on development easily tended to be developed by economists who saw it primarily from the perspective of economic growth. In that context, so long as the monetary value of goods and services (Gross Domestic Product) increased yearly, there was development. From the foregoing, it is obvious that there could be an economic growth, but not development, that is, if the majority of the people did not benefit from it (Nwajiuba, 1999). Development thus goes beyond the narrow lines of economic and material advancement. It is all encompassing (Onwuliri, 2008). The Church has continued to have a positive influence on the development of civilization. Not only did ancient monks save and nurture the remnants of ancient civilization during the Barbarian invasions, it promoted learning and science through its sponsorship of many universities in Europe in the 11th and 12th centuries. The Church's priest-scientists have written their names in gold in the field of genetics, astronomy, meteorology, geomagnetism and solar and astrophysics: the Augustinian Abbot Gregor Mendel, was a pioneer in the study of genetics, Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian priest proposed the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe. Among the lay members of the Church, we have Henri Becquerel, who discovered radio-activity, Lavoisier, the father of modern chemistry, and Vesalius, the founder of modern anatomy. The Church is making impact in virtually every field of human development.

The ground for the collaboration of the church and state in national development

The early Church had at one time identified flight from politics as a component of holiness. The condemnation of Galileo in 1633 seemed to typify the Church's suspicion of the world after the Johannine Jesus (Jn 8:23; 12:31; 14:30; 17:9; 18:36). Otherworldliness was seen as potential holiness, whereas this worldliness was not. Monasticism in practice was considered better than secular involvement, poverty better than responsible use of

wealth, chastity better than conjugal life. Secular values had no real worth except that which religion gave them (Leonard, 2003).

With the emergence of the Second Vatican Council, new ways of understanding the relationship between the Church and the state emerged. The Council teaches that the Church serves the world by witnessing to eternal values, making God's love present, healing and proclaiming human dignity. The Church helps people in their effort to better the world by opening to them the meaning of their existence and dignity. By promoting family unity, consolidating human unity and injecting faith and charity in daily life, the society is helped. By trying to bring faith into a beautiful synthesis with action, the Church also betters the civil society (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965). The Church's relationship with the world is positive and mature, avoiding the extremes of neglect and patronage. The world is seen as part of the Father's plan (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964), and the Christian faith helps believers to appreciate their mandate to develop the world (*Apostolican Actuositatem*, 1965). It is the Church's task to explain God's will for the world's development (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965). To achieve this, Christians are to safeguard the world against misuse (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964); give the world a new soul and spirit by fulfilling their responsibilities in the world (*Apostolican Actuositatem*, 1965). Vatican II began a new era in the Church's relationship to politics; from opposition and neglect to a spirituality of involvement. Major Church documents now focus on work, the family, the economy, social justice, women issues, peace etc., while spiritual writers stress the need for holistic living. The trends of liberation theology, incarnational theology and inculturation are indices of this development (Leonard, 2003).

Politics is bound up with human acts, with which the Church is very much concerned. The Church as a universal institution with its member in every country, even though it be pagan must come into agreement with political institutions to guarantee the good of its members. Even though the Church is a spiritual body, she works for her salvation on earth; it is therefore not surprising that the Catholic Church as an institution arranges concordats, receives diplomatic representatives from various countries, and sends legates and nuncios to various countries to deal with foreign governments on her behalf. While the Church can interfere in politics, not politically but morally, its individual members are free to choose any political party whose tenets and activities are not contrary to their beliefs as Christians (Attwater, 1997). When people see the Church and politics as incompatible, it is because they

understand politics as a dirty game: a corrupt system of rigging, thuggery and fraud instead of the art of managing the fruits of God's gift to humanity (Kukah, 2008). Many religious duties are political actions. For instance, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, giving a drink to the thirsty are both religious duties and at the same time political responsibilities. Politics and religion have a common ground.

The contribution of the Catholic Church to national development

Development has several dimensions. It can be physical, social, cultural, mental, political, behavioural and attitudinal. There are indeed no limits to the very many ways in which the Church can and has contributed to development. However, only a few will be discussed.

The church, social justice and humanitarian service

Social justice and human equality are necessary ingredients for any meaningful development. The Church as an agent of progress has issued so many documents to guide world leaders towards the promotion of social justice. As an expert in humanity, the Church offers by her social doctrine, a set of principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and directives for action. In all Catholic dioceses in Nigeria, there is the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), tasked with the responsibility of promoting justice and peace. At the 2007 elections, the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) printed and circulated banners and stickers encouraging Nigerians to vote and shun violence and all nefarious activities that jeopardize peace. In places ravaged by war, hunger, disease and famine, the Church is seen giving a helping hand to victims. There are millions of Church-owned and run orphanages, rehabilitation homes, youth centres and old people's homes (Onwuliri, 2008). In the promotion of social justice and human dignity, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *The Church and Human Rights*, February 1972, *Dignity of the Human Person*, February 1972, *Violation of Human Rights and Dignity*, September 1984, *Government Must Respect the Rule of Law*, September 1994, *Inalienable Rights- Food, Health, Education, ETC*, September 1985, *Church's Stance in Defence of Life*, November 1995, *Make Public the Oputa Panel Report*, March 2001 etc.

The church as prophet

The Church by its mission and role has a prophetic responsibility in every society. The prophets in the Old Testament spoke in the name of God and denounced people's actions when they go contrary to the will of God; this is

evident in their activities: Nathan reprimanded King David for his murderous action against Uriah (II Sam 12:13), Elijah confronted King Ahab and his wife Jezebel over Naboth's vineyard (I Kgs 21:20-24) (Uwalaka, 2008).

Prophetic mission involves direct confrontation with the causes of social and political oppression, aiming at a historical change of the situation. This would involve the denunciation of real persons, social, economic and political institutions in so far as any of them violates justice. It involves the pursuit of justice for the poor and the oppressed. The basis for this focus is that injustice constitutes a serious violation of the express will of God. To achieve this, Christians are to participate in political action (Nebuchukwu, 1992). In the exercise of its prophetic role in the society the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria Issued the following documents: *Increase in crime Wave*, September 1998, *The Menace of Cult in our Institutions*, September 1997, *Government Exists for the People*, October 1990, *Effects of Greed*, February 1983, *Lavish Lifestyle of Officials*, March 1990, *Greed- The Root Cause of our Problems*, March 1995, *The Root Cause of our Wounds*, February 2002 etc.

The church and peace

The word peace remains a recurring decimal in the Church. Soon after the resurrection, the first blessing that Christ gave his Church was that of peace: "Peace be with you". The Church has in consonance with this event, preached and sought peace all over the world, and especially in the family which is the basis of national and world peace, in the community, in the country and the world. In its involvement in the search for peace for the nation, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *Breakdown of Law- Violence*, November 1996, *Violence Begets Violence*, November 1995, *Violence in the Name of Religion*, February 2000, *Dialogue Rather than Violence*, September 2001 etc.

The church and morality

The Church is the bearer of the moral conscience of the society. It is the bearer of moral vision and moral force by bringing into the public arena the revealed truth of Christ (Uwalaka, 2008). It sets standards and preaches the essence of sound morality; through the light which comes to her from the gospel she continues to provide the principles for the correct organization of social life. The virtues of honesty, integrity, hard work, modesty, humility are all beacons of morality preached by the Church. If the Church is able to mould the character of the society, then a good society will emerge which is

significant for achieving genuine development. To achieve this, the members of the Church must distance themselves from characters and behaviours that are scandalous and embarrassing (Jude, 2008). In fulfilling its role as the moral conscience of the society, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *No Artificial Population Control*, *No Clinical Abortion*, February 1986, *Contraceptives and Abortion Never Acceptable*, October 1987, *New Wave of Prostitution*, February 1996, *Women Trafficking*, February 2002 etc.

The church and education

The Church has made great contributions in the area of education. There are many mission schools, nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary institutions that produce quality graduates to serve the nation. This is about the greatest contribution of the Church to development, because the greatest engine to growth and development of any economy is human capital development. The reduced activity of the Church in the area of ownership and management of schools has impacted negatively on the quality of graduates available to serve national development (Jude, 2008). Examples of these schools are: Veritas University (Vena) Patrick's College, Calabar, Tansian University, Awka, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, The Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) etc. In the promotion of education, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *Education in an Independent Nigeria*, October 1960, *Educated Catholic Laity*, October 1960, *Catholic Contribution to Education*, February 1972, *Struggle against Illiteracy- Adult Education*, February 1972, *Education for All*, February 1983, *The Crisis of the University System*, September 1996 etc.

The church and economic development

In the area of economic development, the Church in many parts of Nigeria has established human development centres and programmes for the acquisition of skills for poverty eradication in the society. Some dioceses like Nnewi and Enugu have established micro-finance outfits. These banks grant loans, give professional advice on business and serve as a means of employment for the teeming population of the unemployed in the society (Onwuliri, 2008). In its concern for economic development, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *Towards a Just Economy*, October 1960, *Economics at the Service of Humanity*, February 1989, *Privatization and Public Institutions*, March 1990, *Gap between the Rich and the Poor Grows*, February 2002.

The Church as the conscience of the nation

Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, the founder of the Kenyan Nation once said to the Catholic Archbishops of Eastern Africa, “The Church is the conscience of the Society, and today a society needs a conscience. Do not be afraid to speak. If we go wrong and you keep quiet, one day you will answer for our mistakes” (Kanu, 2008). The Church is the community of faith called into being by the saving action of Christ, the way, the truth and the life (Uwalaka, 2008). The Church as the conscience of the nation can be captured under the various images of the role of the conscience. The Church as a vigilant watchman to sound alarm against the forces of evil; the Church in the image of a gadfly awakening people from their moral complacency; the Church in the image of guide giving direction because of her privileged position as custodian of the divine mysteries; the Church as the image of moderation and restraint. As a conscience it has to avoid the excesses of laxism and intolerance and rigidity in handling the affairs of people.

Sacred ministers and national development

Even though sacred ministers have a special mission, they cannot deny that what happens in the state positively or negatively affects them. They are not to remain behind the altars while things are going bad. They have a role to play. Christ evangelized not only with words but also with actions. He fed the crowd (Mt 14:14-31), he raised the dead (Jn 11), he healed the sick (Mk 71:37). In the same line, Jesus tells the disciples of John to go and tell the latter what they heard and saw; for the blind regained their sight and the lame walked (Mk 11:4-5) just to mention a few (Esua, 2008). This notwithstanding, in relating with the state, sacred ministers are to do so morally and not ‘politically’. They are not to participate in partisan politics. They are supposed to be spiritual fathers to all. Being a member of one party or the other could divide this significant interest. The full participation into politics is the prerogative of the lay faithful. The sacred minister as a prophet rolls the ball in the court of Christians, denounces bad policies by pointing out the gospel truth (Esua, 2008). The lay faithful whose prerogative is the secular world bring the gospel message to bear on their endeavours. As such, the sacred ministers and the lay faithful work together in transforming the society.

Evaluation and conclusion

The contribution of the Catholic Church in the advancement of national development cannot be overemphasized. The dividends show in the areas of education, politics, health, economics etc. There is no end to the various

ways by which the church has and can influence national development. This is significant, especially, at this time in the world when the Church in Africa appears to be at the centre of Christianity and evangelization. Although a great deal has been achieved, there are still robust and dominant roles open for her in the economic, social, political and others segments of development of society. The Church must therefore equip herself sufficiently so as to effectively perform these roles. However, as the Church makes huge contributions to national development, she must take out some time to look into herself to see if the very things she proposes at the national level are evident in her own structures. If she serves as the conscience of the nation, she can only be effectively and authentically one if the eyes of citizens perceive her to be thus credible. Today people are attracted by actions rather than by creeds and good sermons. If she promotes economic development and promotes salary increase, she must make sure that her workers are living testimonies to this. If she is an agent of peace, she needs to garnish her system in such a way that peace flows from within herself. The church cannot be a true witness of peace if she is torn by hatred, tribalism, nepotism and discrimination. As such, if the Church seeks to be continuously relevant and a reference point in socio-political discourses, she must be true to herself and be clear about the social, cultural and political peculiarities of her origin.

Although the church has contributed hugely to national development, this contribution is constrained by a college of factors, chief of which is the government as manifested in the takeover of church schools, financial difficulties as well as staffing instability. There is need for an appreciation of the contribution of the church to development, as a complement and not as a competitor with the government. The government need to realize this and support the effort of the church. This support could be in the form of returning seized schools in places where they have not been returned and the provision of grant-in-aid to church institutions that advance national development.

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